EARTH SUMMIT

SUSTAINING THE FUTURE
PRESS RELEASE

UNITED NATIONS MEETS TO MONITOR EARTH SUMMIT AGREEMENTS

Commission to Examine Government Progress, Finance Commitments; Focus on Freshwater, Toxic Waste, Health and Human Settlements

New York, 13 May – The UN Commission on Sustainable Development – the watchdog body set up to track progress after the Earth Summit – will get down to business here next week at its second annual session. From 17 to 27 May, it will review Government actions and examine innovative methods for funding sustainable development worldwide.

The 53-member Commission will also look at patterns of energy production and consumption, and worldwide action on freshwater, health, human settlements, toxic chemicals and hazardous waste. Its overall mandate is to monitor implementation of Agenda 21, the global blueprint for sustainable development adopted at the Earth Summit – the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992.

"The Commission will only be as good as the ability of Governments to live up to their Rio commitments," states Ambassador Razali Ismail of Malaysia, outgoing Chair of the Commission. "We must not let Governments off the hook. We need non-governmental groups to ensure that those commitments are honoured." Over 100 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – mostly environment groups – are expected to attend the Commission session as observers to keep pressure on Governments.

On 26-27 May, a high-level meeting – primarily of Ministers of the Environment and of Finance – is expected to provide the political leverage necessary to resolve outstanding issues and to guide the Commission's future work. Dr. Klaus Topfer, Germany's Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Convervation and Nuclear Safety, is expected to be elected Chairman of this year's Commission session.

POST-RIO DEPRESSION OR PROGRESS?

Many senior UN officials acknowledge that the momentum for global change from the Earth Summit has declined into a "post-Rio depression". James Gustave Speth, head of the UN Development Programme, recently attributed the decline to recession and high unemployment in industrialized countries, coupled with the end of the Cold War and loss of political impetus for development assistance.

However, although the big push from Rio has slackened off, work to put the Earth Summit's recommendations into action has been making steady progress worldwide. Governments – as well as businesses and international agencies – have been

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sensitized to the need for sustainable development, although some countries requi.e more financial and technical assistance than others to bring such change about.

In reviewing progress, the Commission will consider reports from Governments and UN agencies. Although most countries have accepted the need to report in principle, just 35 Governments have submitted reports this year. The Commission is expected to streamline the reporting process, which many find too cumbersome.

Underlying the UN agency reports is the idea that for sustainable development to occur, radical changes in programme formulation and funding will be necessary. "A common understanding of sustainable development does not exist" among the agencies, states a report prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO), "Consequently there is a strong risk that the revolutionary changes called for by Agenda 21 will rapidly be lost sight of."

The UN Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) notes that most agencies are continuing with established work priorities. The Centre recommends that the Commission consider financial incentives to reward multi-agency programmes in support of Agenda 21. This would encourage inter-agency cooperation, joint programming and the pooling of resources, and would also prevent duplication.

UPDATE ON OTHER RIO INITIATIVES

Climate Change and Biodiversity Conventions. The two legal agreements opened for signing in Rio have both entered into force -- an unprecedented pace for international law.

The Framework Convention on Climate Change, which aims to prevent global warming and climate change, became legally binding on 21 March 1994 and has been ratified by 71 countries. Developed country commitments under the treaty -- and the effectiveness of efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions -- will be reviewed in March 1995 when the Conference of Parties, responsible for overseeing implementation of the Convention, holds its first session in Berlin.

The Convention on Biological Diversity, designed to prevent further loss of species, came into force on 29 December 1993 and has been ratified by 52 countries. To work out details of implementation, a second session of the Intergovernmental Committee on the Convention on Biological Diversity will be held in Nairobi from 20 June to 1 July 1994, in preparation for the first meeting of the Conference of Parties.

Migratory Fish. As called for at the Earth Summit, the UN Conference on Straddling and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks has held two substantive sessions, in August 1993 and March 1994, to address the serious problem of international tensions over high-seas fishing and depletion of fish stocks worldwide. The economic stakes are high, national sovereignty has been a sticking point, and progress has been slow thus far. It is still unclear whether the outcome will be a legally binding convention. A third substantive session, intended to be the last, is scheduled for 15-26 August in New York.

Small Island States. Based on Agenda 21, a programme of action to assist small islands in their work toward sustainable development was launched at the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, held in Barbados from 25 April to 6 May 1994. A Barbados Declaration, setting out political principles, was also adopted. Although island countries expressed some disappointment at the lack of financial commitments from donor

countries, the Conference succeeded in giving international prominence to the particular needs and vulnerabilities of small islands and in strengthening ties among the islands.

Desertification. The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Convention on Desertification will hold its final session in Paris, 6-17 June. The draft text outlines action to prevent further degradation of fragile lands. The consequences of widespread desertification include global warming, the loss of plant and animal species, mass migrations of refugees to cities and the continuing need for emergency aid to populations in crisis.

Financing for sustainable development. After several rounds of negotiations, changes in policy- and decision-making structures at the Global Environment Facility (GEF) requested by the Earth Summit are now complete. Over US$2 billion has been pledged to replenish the Facility, which is a joint project of the World Bank, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN Environment Programme. While some developing countries are taking a "wait-and-see" approach to the changes, the Facility will now finance local activities, such as desertification prevention projects, as they relate to its mandated funding areas -- protection of the ozone layer, biodiversity, climate change and pollution of international waters.

Pledges to Capacity 21 -- a UNDP initiative to assist developing countries in implementing Agenda 21, mostly by integrating environment concerns into national development strategies -- have reached over US$30 million.

Progress on Forests. Plans for an international legal agreement on forests were abandoned prior to the Summit in favour of a set of principles on the sustainable management of all types of forests. Efforts to put these principles into action are continuing in two joint initiatives: one sponsored by Canada and Malaysia; the other by the United Kingdom and India. Both are designed to prepare for the Commission's 1995 review of forest-related commitments made in Rio.

Toxic Chemicals and Hazardous Wastes. In March 1994, the 64 Parties to the Basel Convention completely banned the export of hazardous wastes from OECD to non-OECD countries. This landmark decision, while not directly following from the Earth Summit, will undoubtedly impact on the Commission's discussion of toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes. The first phase of the ban prohibits, with immediate effect, the export from OECD to non-OECD countries of hazardous waste for final disposal. Exports for recycling or recovery must cease by the end of 1997.

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Available on request (no charge):
40-page summary of Agenda 21
Texts of Rio Declaration, Forest Principles
Conventions on Climate Change and Biodiversity

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